

# What Research Says About the Best Way to Spend Money Now to Solve Homelessness Long-Term

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The Supreme Court's [ruling](#) striking down the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's eviction moratorium has put millions at risk of housing instability and homelessness. If households are unable to receive [emergency rental assistance](#) in time, many may join the [nearly 600,000](#) people who experienced homelessness on a given night in the United States prior to the pandemic. To reverse the growing trend of homelessness, people facing housing instability need effective, evidence-based solutions. Thankfully, decades of rigorous research have shown practitioners and policymakers what can work. And right now, the influx of relief funds offers an opportunity to finally expand these evidence-based programs, but these dollars have to be spent quickly. To truly end homelessness, states and cities must both expand effective solutions in the short term and conduct additional research to bolster sustained stability in the long term.

“Housing instability” is a term that encompasses both homelessness and factors that increase one's risk of homelessness, such as couch-surfing and eviction. People who are evicted move more frequently, which makes it harder to hold down a stable job, loosens ties to community, and, for the [1.3 million students who experienced homelessness in the 2018-19 school year](#), interrupts education.

Homelessness and housing instability disproportionately affect Black people, members of the LGBTQ community, people with severe mental illness, veterans, survivors of domestic violence, and several other marginalized communities. And that was before the pandemic and the looming eviction cliff.

Fortunately, there is already strong evidence on numerous effective strategies to end homelessness. At J-PAL North America, a research organization based out of the Department of Economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, we work with researchers and policymakers to conduct rigorous randomized evaluations on what policies truly lift people out of poverty.

For example, research has shown that subsidizing rent through the Housing Choice Voucher program, commonly known as Section 8, **can reduce homelessness**. Voucher holders have a **lower incidence of homelessness** and an increased likelihood of **living in stable housing**. Vouchers have also been shown to help beyond just putting a roof over someone's head. They decrease family separation and psychological distress, and increase school attendance and food security. Additional research by J-PAL researchers has shown that **providing comprehensive mobility services** and **improving access to neighborhood information** in conjunction with vouchers can boost their positive impacts. But only **25 percent of eligible households are able to receive vouchers** due to insufficient funding, and applicants spend years on waitlists. (President Biden has **proposed** an additional \$5 billion for the Housing Choice Voucher program, which would help another 200,000 eligible families.)

Randomized evaluations have shown the effectiveness of **Housing First**. For decades, most housing services required people to meet employment or sobriety requirements in order to be housed. Housing First programs do literally what they say: provide housing first, with no preconditions.

Several **randomized evaluations** tested Housing First programs and found that individuals in permanent supportive housing spend about half as much time unhoused or in the hospital than those not in the program. Policymakers in Utah then used this research to expand the evidence-based program. The state **became a national model** after it adopted a Housing First approach in 2005 and reduced chronic homelessness by 91 percent by 2015.

There is still much to be learned about how to end homelessness, and rigorous randomized evaluations can help. First, further research can provide insights into how to improve programs that we know can work. For example, despite the success of vouchers, they are not a simple “golden ticket.” It is hard to get a voucher and to then find landlords that accept such vouchers, even when **“source-of-income” discrimination is technically illegal**. Low housing stock and **discriminatory practices** make **finding housing arduous**—if not impossible—for voucher-holders. We need further research on ways to increase landlord acceptance of vouchers.

Second, randomized evaluations can be used to identify additional evidence-based strategies. While eviction moratoria have offered short-term fixes, researchers are studying potential long-term solutions. There are multiple ongoing studies on the provision of **emergency financial assistance** and **legal support services** for those facing eviction.

The work of ending homelessness requires a lot of money. The U.S. Department of the Treasury **is encouraging** states and localities to use federal relief funds for evidence-based interventions and evaluations “designed to build evidence.” However, American Rescue Plan funds are time-limited and

must be spent by the end of 2024. By spending these funds on both evidence-based programs like Housing First and evidence-generating evaluations, stakeholders can simultaneously address immediate needs and foster housing stability in the decades to come.

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